

# What is Text Complexity?

Aligning to the  
Common Core State Standards  
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## Text Complexity

- One of the key requirements of the Common Core State Standards for Reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of *steadily increasing complexity* as they progress through school.
- Students must be able to read and comprehend *independently* and *proficiently* the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers.
- [http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/documents/Common\\_Core\\_Standards-ELA\\_Appendix-A-Text\\_Complexity.pdf](http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/documents/Common_Core_Standards-ELA_Appendix-A-Text_Complexity.pdf)



## What is Complexity?

- Three measures of complexity:

Quantitative

Qualitative

Reader and Task



## Quantitative Dimensions or Factors

**Include aspects of text such as:**

- Word length (number of syllables)
- Sentence length (consider types of sentences)
- Word frequency (how often it is found in text commonly taught at the grade level)
- Text cohesion (how well and obviously the text hangs together)
- **Often measured with computer software**



## Quantitative Determinations

- Common tools include Lexile, ATOS, Dale-Chall, Flesch-Kincaid, Coh-Metrix
- Quantitative measures have limitations – they don't account for content
- Quantitative considerations should not be used as a sole determination of grade level appropriateness, but as one part of the complexity equation



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Considerations include:**

- Levels of purpose or meaning (explicit, implicit, direct, abstract, etc.)
- Structure and Layout (organization, text features, graphics)
- Language conventionality and clarity (simple sentences/conversational language, various sentence structures, figurative language, etc.)
- Knowledge demands (common, topic specific, intertextuality, cultural reference)



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Levels of Meaning (literary texts)**

- Single level of meaning → Multiple levels of meaning

### **Purpose (informational texts)**

- Explicitly stated purpose → Implicit purpose, may be hidden or obscure



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Structure: Literary Texts**

- Simple → Complex
- Explicit → Implicit
- Traits of a common genre or subgenre → Traits specific to a particular genre
- Conventional → Unconventional
- Events related in chronological order → Events related out of chronological order



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Structure: Informational Texts**

- Simple → Complex
- Explicit → Implicit
- Traits of a common genre or subgenre → Traits specific to a particular discipline
- Simple graphics → Sophisticated graphics
- Graphics unnecessary or merely supplementary to understanding the text → Graphics essential to understanding the text and may provide information not otherwise conveyed in the text



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Language Conventionality and Clarity**

- Literal → Figurative or ironic
- Clear → Ambiguous or purposefully misleading
- Contemporary, familiar → Archaic or otherwise unfamiliar
- Conversational → General academic and domain-specific





## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Knowledge Demands: Life Experiences (literary texts)**

- Simple theme → Complex or sophisticated themes
- Single themes → Multiple themes
- Common, everyday experiences or clearly fantastical situations → Experiences distinctly different from one's own
- Single perspective → Multiple perspectives
- Perspective(s) like one's own → Perspective(s) unlike or in opposition to one's own



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Knowledge Demands: Cultural/Literary Knowledge (chiefly literary texts)**

- Everyday knowledge and familiarity with genre conventions required → Cultural and literary knowledge useful
- Low intertextuality (few if any references or allusions to other texts) → High intertextuality (many references/allusions to other texts)



## Qualitative Dimensions

### **Knowledge Demands: Content/Discipline Knowledge (chiefly informational texts)**

- Everyday knowledge and familiarity with genre conventions required → Extensive, perhaps specialized discipline-specific content knowledge required
- Low intertextuality (few if any references to/ citations of other texts) → High intertextuality (many references to/citations of other texts)



## Reader and Task

### **Considerations include:**

- Cognitive capabilities (attention, memory, inference, critical analysis ability, and visualization)
- Motivations (purpose for reading, interest in topic, self-efficacy)
- Knowledge and experience (vocabulary, topic, strategies)



## Reader and Task

- Educator professional judgment: considers qualitative and quantitative measures to match the texts to specific readers and task.
- All students must be supported as they learn to comprehend ***independently*** a broad range of ***increasingly complex*** texts.
- Tasks should match text content and structure to learning target (standard)

## Complexity

### *To Kill a Mockingbird:*

- Quantitative measures place this novel in the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade complexity band
- “In answer to the clerk’s booming voice, a little bantam cock of a man rose and strutted to the stand, the back of his neck reddening at the sound of his name.” (excerpt from chapter 17)



## Levels of Meaning

- Theme: Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. The existence of social inequality is a theme in TKAM.
  - clear, obvious, revealed early and conveyed with little subtlety
- Readers see segregation in the courtroom,
- Jury is made of white men,
- Description of Ewell homestead in contrast to negro neighborhood reveals futility of Ewell's racist sentiment,
- Ewell's constant racist remarks are often set against the compassion and dignity of the black community



## Levels of Meaning

- Theme: "Fatherhood trumps all"
  - Implicit, often subtle, revealed over entirety of text with good fathers contrasted against monstrous fathers
- Mr. Ewell is *suggested* as the one who beat Mayella
- When an angry mob of men arrive at the jail to hang Tom, the presence of the children and Scout's message to her friend's father bring the dads back to their senses and responsibilities [Walter Cunningham]
- Boo Radley is likely abused by his father but behaves in a protective, paternal way with the Finch children



## Structure

- Narrative is simple: an adult narrator tells of childhood memories
- Narration is from first person point of view
- Order of events is chronological after brief introduction
- There are no graphics and no variation in format

## Language Conventinality

Meaning: many sentences are simple or compound but figurative language is subtle.

- “No **economic fluctuations** changed their status—people like the Ewells lived as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of a depression.”
- “In answer to the clerk’s booming voice, a **little bantam cock** of a man rose and strutted to the stand, the back of his neck reddening at the sound of his name.”

## Language conventionality

Vocabulary: occasionally unfamiliar, archaic (1930's), colloquial (southern conversational)

- Economic fluctuations
- No resemblance to his namesake
- Congenital defects
- Shotgun hallway
- An ancient icebox
- Had Miss Maudie deigned to permit

## Knowledge demands

Life experiences: experiences portrayed are distinctly different from those of the common reader, yet not fantastical

- Few students will have been in a courtroom,
- to the South,
- participated in a barter system,
- experienced a lynching mob

## Knowledge demands

Literary and cultural knowledge: no references to other texts but many cultural elements

- “Maycomb’s Ewells lived behind the town garbage dump in what was once a Negro cabin.”
- “...people like the Ewells lived as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of a depression.”



## Knowledge Demands

Subject Matter Knowledge: a moderate level of judicial/courtroom knowledge is helpful

- “...they think opposing counsel to be the personal enemies of their parents, they suffer agonies, and are surprised to see them often go out arm-in-arm with their tormentors during the first recess.”
- “So serene was Judge Taylor’s court, that he had few occasions to use his gavel, but he hammered fully five minutes.”



## Complexity and Alignment

Now what?

Evaluate the texts you use and determine whether they are properly placed by:

- Comparing current use to where (if) the title is located in appendix B
- Write a paragraph which argues the value of placing the text elsewhere
- Develop tasks aligned to standards which demonstrate grade level complexity



## Quantitative

- Use any measure you prefer – 2 or more?
- Compare to your qualitative measures: can you explain which it matches or does not match?





## Reader and Task

### Readers:

- Experience: what have they done in and out of school; what are they doing in other classes?
- Past performance: have they read a similar text with ease or struggled? Have they been building skills to support proficiency with the tasks associated with this text?
- Ability/capacity: how much can the students handle right now?
- Interest and motivation



## Reader and Task

- Consider levels of complexity relative to the tasks students will do:
- Will the students skim, read closely, connect to other texts, build a continuous product, work independently or with others?
- Are you asking **text-dependent questions** as well as more general questions?
- Can you increase complexity by *refining/revising* the tasks?



## Reader and Task

Impact Motivation Positively:

1. Relevance
2. Choice
3. Success
4. Collaboration
5. Thematic units



## Reader and Task

Impact Motivation Negatively:

1. No relevance
2. Excessive control
3. Difficult lessons
4. Frequent individual work
5. Disconnected units



## Reader and Task

*Explain what Atticus Finch taught his children about racism and how he did it.*

Instead of making it personal – what the reader learns – this task focuses the analysis on what Scout and Jem experience as well as what Atticus does

Keep a journal while reading to note what Atticus does intentionally

Record the children's reactions, especially when observing Atticus and learning as a consequence rather than a plan

Purpose of writing is to explain what **Jem and Scout learn**



## Reader and Task

*Describe the occurrences of domestic violence in the novel and explain what the author may want the reader to understand about DV.*

- Can be very sophisticated
- Need background information about DV
- Supports analysis of explicit information as well as inference



## Reader and Task

As a prereading exercise, show photos from the 1930's Farm Bureau collection

*Review your observations of the Farm Bureau photos and explain how they support or refute the author's portrayal of the Ewell family.*

Students must have experience and guidance to analyze the photos

Connect to text – author's purpose/ photojournalist's purpose



## Transition and Consequences

An early step for CCSS transition:

1. Determine complexity of the texts you currently use
2. Determine where you have gaps or inconsistent complexity progressions

Consequences:

1. Identify professional content knowledge which needs to be expanded or explored
2. Identify instructional strategies that need to be revised
3. Plan professional development



## Outcomes

### Finding:

- Texts level out and do not present an opportunity for growth of complexity

### Suggestions:

- Pair or group texts with short reading which will support continued growth
- Shuffle texts across grades and replace where a gap opens
- Connect instruction to more than one content area to increase exposure to various texts



## Outcomes

- All students, including those who are behind, have extensive opportunities to encounter and comprehend grade-level complex text as required by the standards.
- Curriculum materials must provide extensive opportunities for **all students** to engage with complex text as a member of a class, although students whose reading ability is developing at a slower rate also will need supplementary opportunities to read text they can comprehend successfully without extensive supports.
- A significant percentage of tasks and questions are **text dependent**.
- (From Publisher's Criteria for CCSS)





## Resources

- [http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/ccss\\_modules.html#mod2](http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/ccss_modules.html#mod2)
- Documents used in this presentation
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., Lapp, D. (2012). *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*, International Reading Association. ISBN 978-0-87207-478-1
- Series from NCTE. *Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards*. 4 books –by grade span.  
<https://secure.ncte.org/store/supporting-students-9-12>
- More coming in the near future



## Disclaimers

- Early elementary may not find this material as helpful: Lee Anne Larsen will present information soon
- Graphic novels (including informational texts) will also have a slightly different approach soon
- Information will continue to unfold over the summer – stay connected



## For more information

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- **Maine ELA ListServ:** Stay informed about current developments in Maine ELA.  
<http://mailman.informe.org/mailman/listinfo/englishlanguagearts>
- Visit the ELA website at Maine DOE for frequent updates and expanding resources  
<http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/>

